

Choreographing a Postmodern Turn: The Creative Process and Somatics

Jill Green, PhD

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

This article explores a reconceptualization of creativity from a postmodern perspective. The author addresses sociopolitical aspects of somatics and creativity through an account of a postmodern paradigmatic shift that emerged as a reflective tool during a qualitative research study. Through this "postmodern turn," new theoretical questions were raised such as, How is somatic and creative experience inscribed by culture? Do personal somatic power, creative expression, and social change work against each other, or is it possible to move toward social change through somatic practice and creative experience? The reformed questions, postpositivist analysis, and discussion of research findings provide a starting point for the alternative framework offered in the paper. The author proposes a reconceptualization of creativity through a posthumanistic lens; from this position, somatic and creative work may be tools for personal change, but are also inseparable from sociopolitical change.

Throughout time there have been many diverse theories of creativity. These theories are often complex and contradictory. Though some perspectives, such as that of Sir Francis Galton, attribute creative activity solely to inherited traits (see John-Steiner, 1987, p. 219), other humanistic and environmental theorists believe that everyone can be creative (Fromm, 1959; Maslow, 1967, 1968; May, 1965, 1975; Parnes, 1975; Rogers, 1971; Stein, 1974; Torrance, 1967; Torrance, Clements, & Goff, 1989; Torrance & Torrance, 1973). Some theories focus on the creative product as a result of a higher level of achievement, usually made or performed by a person with a gift, talent, or special quality, whereas other theories focus on the process of creativity as a valuable activity itself (Fromm, 1959; May, 1965, 1975; Maslow, 1967, 1968; Rogers, 1971). Some psychoanalysts such as Freud explained creativity as a neurotic or dysfunctional activity (Bloomberg, 1973, pp. 1-5; John-Steiner, 1987, p. 219), whereas others present it as an important part of every healthy and full life (Johnston, 1986; May, 1965, 1975; Maslow, 1967, 1968; Rogers, 1971).

The purpose of this paper is to explore a posthumanistic framework for creativity. This framework includes aspects of both a humanistic or process-oriented approach, and a more recent shift in thinking about the creative process through a postmodern perspective. It takes into consideration personal and sociopolitical aspects of the creative process, looks at how our ideas about the creative process have been socially constructed and influenced, and problematizes an assumed universality of experience regarding creativity. First, I will discuss the creative process in relation to my specific investigation into the interrelatedness between somatic practices and the creative process. I will chart an emerging theoretical shift and reconceptualization of the creative process through posthumanistic and postmodern lenses. Then I will discuss the findings of this investigation in consideration of this postmodern turn. Lastly, implications for theories of creativity in dance will be introduced. The study is intended to act as a vehicle for the theoretical discussion that follows.

The Emergent Research Problem: The Moving Self

The study started out as an investigation into the relationship between somatic practices and the creative process. I use the term *somatics* to describe body-mind practices that focus on an inner awareness and that use the proprioceptive communication system or an inner sensory mode. In this sense, the body is not viewed as an objective entity but as "an embodied process of internal awareness and communication" (Green, 1993, p. 17).

I also began the study with a predominantly humanistic perspective of the creative process. Humanists such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Erich Fromm tended to view creativity as a process of self-awareness and self-actualization. As part of a human potential movement, this perspective of creativity stresses a full quality of life and inner consciousness, as well as a heightening of sensory experience and the abilities to surrender and self-actualize. This approach moved away from earlier theories of creativity that focused on the creative product and the measurement of creative abilities. The humanists moved toward a more integral and less mechanical world view. It is an approach that is basically process-oriented, that perceives of creativity experientially and somatically, and that affirms the cultivation of a creative life for everyone. Due to the strong intersection between this perspective and somatic theory and practice, this viewpoint initially provided a theoretical framework for the investigation.

The research setting was established through the development of a university level class. I designed a course titled "Somatics and Creativity," in order to provide a pedagogical environment in which students could engage in somatic practice and the creative process. I was interested in teaching somatic modalities and activities related to the creative process while providing a context for the research. The class provided both exploration in specific somatic and body awareness practices and immersion in the creative process through exploratory activities that culminated in a collaborative group performance in the form of a video. I hoped to investigate how somatic practice may facilitate creativity within an

instructional setting. Six participants were selected through word of mouth or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as a *snowball sampling process*. (One participant had to drop out during the second quarter due to scheduling problems.) Videotapes and audiotapes were reviewed and used to write fieldnotes. Other data included group and individual interviews, journals, and submitted artwork.

When I entered this qualitative and postpositivist research investigation (see Green, 1994), I initially sought to (a) explore and interpret how these student participants experienced somatic and creative processes, (b) determine if and how they found a relationship between the two processes during the project, and (c) understand how somatic practice and body-mind techniques helped to foster creativity in this environment.

However, as the investigation continued, my theoretical framework began to change as new research questions and foci emerged from participant responses and from my personal changing perspectives. What particularly emerged in relationship to the changing research themes and questions was a transforming conceptualization and definition of creativity and the concept of "self." Struggling with a new reading of postmodern literature and participant responses to questions about creativity, I found that my framework for creativity needed to be changed. The project moved away from descriptions of creativity based on the discovery of a "true self." I found that the foundational roots of humanism are based on a static conceptualization of "the self" and the idea of the self as essentialist, value free, and devoid of any social meaning or influence. These roots collided with the postmodern turn away from the assumed universality of experience and the concept of a true self. Thus, I began to question frameworks for somatics and creativity based on a static conceptualization of the self as I recognized the possibility of the self as a social construction and became concerned about a sole focus on inner perception and growth without an awareness of a larger social context (Green, 1994). The participants also, for the most part, supported this turn by framing their experiences around definitions of creativity that reached out to include more sociopolitical meanings, as I will describe in the next section of this paper.

Consequently, the study began to raise additional questions such as, How are somatic and creative experiences inscribed by culture? Do personal somatic power and social change work against each other or is it possible to move toward social change through somatics and creative practices? Can creative practices be used as a vehicle for sociopolitical change as well as personal change? How do theories of creativity need to be reconceptualized in a postmodern world?

Findings and Implications: Wearing Polka Dots on Our Backs

As is often the case in postpositivist research, the findings reflected the changing and moving paradigmatic positioning of the researcher. Recognition of my own researcher subjectivity, along with an attempt to be reflexive and aware of emerging questions and issues, led me to a heightened sensitivity to qualitative responses that addressed a reformulation of somatic practice and the creative

process. Thus, as I began to address wider concerns and as the investigation moved into a more macro or global sphere, somatic practice and creative work provided a context for sociopolitical consciousness and change.

For example, I became aware that one participant, Pam, spoke of her experiences with the creative process in relationship to a politics of health as well as an inner personal authority. She spoke about the personal side of creativity and her feelings that everyone has the ability to be creative on what she called an "internal empowerment level," and she also reached out to include social meanings of creativity and the political implications of acting creatively. She communicated that she experienced creativity both as a sense of power and struggle. She also spoke about creativity both on a personal level, through an engagement and enjoyment of the somatic and creative processes and an inner struggle and risk-taking endeavor, and on a social level, by reaching out through a struggle to take social action. For example, on a personal level, she expressed how scary it was to explore the creative process because it involved risk and change; these feelings were embodied through particular creative explorations in which she found it difficult to let go and trust her intuition. After participating in some inner movement creative explorations she said,

In a way, being creative is, in this society, like being a renegade. Because in society . . . we act so much like lemmings and like sheep—we follow without thinking. And creativity says, "I might be a lemming but I'm going to put polka dots on my back today. . . . I'm going to take another way."

These experiences may be characterized by what Rollo May referred to as a sense of courage to break societal traditions and rebel against current norms. In *The Courage to Create* (1975), May defines creative courage as "the discovering of new forms, new symbols, and new patterns on which society can be built" (pp. 14-15). The creative individual, to May, requires courage for two reasons. First, the creator must confront the anxiety of revealing her or his soul and offering society new constructions of meaning. This means that current rules must be broken and destroyed, and the creator must face resistance from society. In this context, the creative process may be thought of in terms of Thomas Kuhn's concept of *paradigm shift* (1962). The artist must have the courage to continuously initiate new paradigm shifts and constructions about the world.¹

Second, according to May, a creative individual must face her or his own resistance to new constructions. Imaginations are lived out in the creative process. One may be fearful of her/his powerful imagination, but must allow it to come through anyway. Anxiety is a by-product because "it is not possible that there be a genuinely new idea without a shake up occurring to some degree" (p. 63). Notwithstanding May's universalist humanistic implications that there may be a "genuinely new idea," Pam's sense of being a renegade and wearing polka dots on her

¹See also Vera John-Steiner (1987) for a discussion about Kuhn's concept of paradigm change in relationship to the creativity of thinking.

back might reflect this type of courage to create, which involves a shake up and struggle with risk-taking activities. In this sense, although May was considered a humanist, he did reach out to include more social meanings regarding creativity. And in this regard the creative process may be conceptualized as subversive because it offers new social constructions and threatens the status quo with divergent perspectives and norms.

Other participants also talked about struggle, risk, and anxiety in relation to their creative pursuits. Discomfort and the ability to keep one's mind open were recurring considerations in the class.

But, searching for meaning-making from a postmodern perspective, I became further aware of comments from participants that not only challenged the status quo through personal change and an awareness of the social world, but helped move them toward social action and challenged classically humanistic conceptions of the creative process related to universalist and essentialist ideas of self.

For example, Pam also spoke about her intention to take social action and generate social change. She spoke about being able to let go and move inward to find strength so that she might be able to challenge current dominant social constructions about the world. She also spoke about using somatics toward social change as part of her own practice (she was pursuing a PhD in social work) by helping people question dominant oppressive meaning systems.

Pam also indicated that working with somatics and creativity helped her to challenge social constructions of the body. She said that through her explorations of body awareness and the creative process she felt more comfortable with her body and was able to problematize societal norms regarding weight. For example, she became aware of issues of sizism when she attempted to buy a leotard and the saleswomen said to her, "You are going to wear a leotard?" (referring to her large size). She decided to work with some of the creative explorations in class (such as improvisations with eyes closed and "allowing the body to stretch itself" from Kinetic Awareness, in which the students listen to the inner messages of the body before moving) in the future in order to address these issues. In other words, Pam was not simply actualizing her self as an essential being, waiting to be discovered, but was struggling with societal expectations and standards of self. She was struggling with imposed definitions of creativity and becoming aware that she was not quite free to be creative in a universalist sense. Rather, there were restrictions, standards (i.e., larger women could not dance), and a prescribed artistic aesthetic.

Another student participant, Marcia, also spoke about political applications of the creative process. She often communicated that she felt Western education disconnects us from our bodies and suppresses creative activity by stripping our inner creative impulses and somatic authority. Her responses are in line with Don Johnson's argument (1983) that Western culture, through our educational systems, tends to disconnect us from our experiential and somatic authority by imposing bodily norms and models of ideal bodily being. Marcia expressed a number of situations during her educational experiences when she felt somatically isolated and disconnected from her inner authority. During the project she became angered by an educational system that neglects creative awareness, play, and exploration

and associated this neglect to her feelings of physical discomfort and awkwardness with movement and dance. Her lack of bodily confidence and feeling of movement awkwardness were often tied to societal expectations and norms.

Marcia spoke about how educational experiences restricted freedom of movement and creative ideas by forcing her to conform to normalized standards of behavior. She spoke both of limitations she felt when attempting to take dance classes and restrictions in her general education. For example, she remembered not being allowed to play and explore inner and body awareness; and she remembered being confined and forced to sit in restraining chairs for long periods of time, which she said can "kill you." She associated creativity with somatic authority and the freedom to play and explore, and often spoke about how she had been stifled in this regard during her educational history.

Marcia also expressed the emotional devastation created by such a disconnection from a sense of bodily integration and inner authority and the resulting practical dysfunction, such as the perception of her inability to dance and even walk efficiently and function in the world in a strong and healthy way. She tied restriction of movement to psychophysical and social disconnection and disempowerment. For example, she felt she was not free to explore all movement possibilities, not simply because she did not have the talent or inner wherewithal but because, as a woman, she felt limited. A previous rape had left her with a somatically disconnected body that she felt further opened her to bodily violence and oppression, as well as a disconnection from creative expression.

While viewing these responses through a postmodern lens, I became acutely aware that a political framework was necessary for Marcia to understand how she was not automatically free to express herself, but how social prescriptions for movement and bodily being interfered with her ability to be creative. Marcia could not fully understand her body problems by simply talking about her "self." Without the political framework for understanding and defining creativity, Marcia might continue to be helpless; simply assuming creativity is available to everyone sidesteps Marcia's problems with dance, movement, and the creative process.

Marcia communicated that the class provided her with a nonjudgmental and supportive environment that helped her play and explore movement, and that she experienced increased self-confidence and felt more creative as a result. She said that she felt better about herself and was more able to "take a stand" and be more creative. She also expressed the feeling that she felt more empowered to go out and "speak politically" (as a women's studies major and as a woman). Somatically speaking, she said that the work and engagement in creative exercises gave her "more guts."

Implications: Art as a Moving Work in Progress

Of course one cannot generalize from such a small sample; however, the emerging themes here raise significant questions about conceptualizing the creative process. Initially, I entered the inquiry with a more humanistic framework for creativity based on defining the creative process in the sense of self-actualization

within a personal sphere. Working with self-actualization and self-encounter, I did not consider the self a changing, multiple, and socially constructed concept. And I did not consider self-change in relationship to social dynamics. Through this project, I became aware that this framework is limited because it individualizes experience and is in danger of normalizing creativity outside of a social context. It affirms individualistic change but may actually numb us to the ways bodily and creative experience are culturally inscribed and controlled.

What may be required is a reconceptualization of creativity that recognizes, not a static foundational self, but a changing self in process in relationship to the sociopolitical world. Creativity expressed in this sense is directly connected to inner authority; but it also resists technologies of normalization, dominant meaning systems, and social hierarchies.

One alternative, suggested by Lee Quinby (1991), is to view creativity as a process of becoming and changing. Rather than looking at creativity as a process of self-discovery, she sees it as a stylization of freedom. According to Quinby, "This stylization of freedom promotes selfhood as an activity of artistic creation, writing as a means of self-culture, and the art of the self as a personal and civic virtue" (p. 3). It is an expression of personal and social struggle against a dominant culture.

Quinby presents a model for a reformulation of creativity in the context of the presentation of a changing self within a postfoundational social world. She does not deny the importance of the self in the creative process but rejects an essentialist definition of self and reconceptualizes the self as a type of artistic work in process. The self is not static or removed from the social world but rather stylizes freedom and works along with social change. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories, selfhood is inextricably linked to "self-culture" and civic as well as personal virtue. Quinby breaks the dichotomy between self and society and provides a means whereby the creative process may be tied to social and political change.

This model reconceptualizes the self as a process of change, not as a real or essential truth. The model resists normalization because it avoids a working definition of self as static and unchanging, or as separate from the culture in which it is constructed. Through this changing creative process, one struggles with oneself and with others.

Self-stylization is also presented as a practice of freedom through a poetics of liberty. Quinby's research particularly analyzes written works about American democracy that "overtly oppose claims for transcendent Truth" (p. 13). She purports,

Whether attributed to nature, personal experience, or society, the sublime and beautiful are represented in these writings as vehicles for social and personal transformation; that is, the disruptive sublime is seen as making possible individual and civic beauty. In other words, according to this conceptualization of ethics, one combats normalizing and regulatory mechanisms of discipline through exercises of self-stylization understood as a means of acquiring truths that are to be transformed into action. By portraying

America as a society in the process of being created as a work of art—and themselves and others as creators—these writers stress the artistic and ethical potential of individuals and society. Thus, in America's aesthetics of liberatory, beauty is not a given. . . . It is a changing artistic activity of self and society, an activity made possible by disruptive energies conceived of as the sublime. (p. 12)

Thus, stylization of the self through the creative process becomes "one of the most important means of resisting contemporary restrictions on freedom" (p. 4). In this context, oppression may be linked to the impeding of "creative energies," and "free play" may be defended for all marginalized groups (p. 61).

Although Quinby's formalization is limited to the art of writing, there are implications for other creative forms, including dance. In order to "choreograph a postmodern turn" in dance, we may need to rethink creativity by considering the larger global context. Rather than limit the creative process to a sense of self-fulfillment or self-actualization with a focus on one's human potential and assume that everyone can be creative and has equal access to artistic success, we must also look at how our society limits some definitions of creative endeavors and suppresses the creative energies of disenfranchised groups. For example, how often do we consider the relevance of choreography that is based on an alternative aesthetics of beauty and that deviates from the presentation of what we think of as ideal dance bodies? Certainly, some choreographers are beginning to present diverse body types, but the acceptance of an inclusive model is rare in dance, particularly in relationship to body ideals for women dancers.

This new conceptualization is not just about "finding one's self," but uses dance, somatics, and creative practice as vehicles for social change. It is consistent with Johnson's (1983) call for creative expression that resists authoritarian structures by moving us toward an inner somatic sensibility so that we may reconnect to our bodily authority and challenge dominant meaning systems. As Marcia felt oppressed by educational institutions that squelched her creativity and somatic sensitivity, "standing up" became a metaphor for her somatic power and ability to challenge dominant meaning systems through her creative process. And Pam associated somatic practice with taking care of the self and resisting socially imposed bodily behaviors.

In this sense, somatics and creativity are also not separate, but are interwoven with a changing and struggling self. I found that one of the most interesting findings that emerged from the postmodern turn in the research was the overwhelming response that the participants had not experienced somatic practice as being separate from the creative process.

This postfoundational and posthumanistic reconceptualization provided a context for viewing somatics and creativity as part of a twofold process. This process helps us reconnect to our inner somatic signals and creative impulses. It also helps us stop numbing potentially subversive bodily responses that resist prescribed and normalized bodily behavior according to a dominant model. In this context, the somatic process is part of a creative process that moves toward expression of a

changing and creating self that acts as a "renegade" (in Pam's words) self, struggling against the formation of docile bodies (Foucault, 1977) and social prescriptions for bodily behavior and being.

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